

Pat Kessler, WCCO

It was a coming out party on Wednesday for Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann's latest political project: a Tea Party caucus in the U.S. Congress.

Bachmann said her new caucus is not the Tea Party, but it is a part of the Tea Party movement and its members support Tea Party principles.

"We are not the mouthpiece of the Tea Party," said the republican congresswoman. "We are not taking the Tea Party and controlling it from Washington, D.C. I am not the head of the Tea Party nor are any of these members of Congress the head of the Tea Party movement."

The unveiling of Bachmann's caucus featured a lineup of ethnic and minority speakers showcasing the Tea Party's diversity. One African American speaker said she resented allegations that elements of the Tea Party are racist.

"We are not terrorists, we're not racists," said Danielle Hollars, a mother from Woodbridge, Virginia. "We are Americans who care about our country and the future for our children and our grandchildren."

Last week, the Northern Iowa Tea Party took down this billboard comparing President Barack Obama to Hitler. And the NAACP passed a resolution calling on the Tea Party to denounce bigotry.

Minnesota Democratic Congresswoman Betty McCollum says the new Tea Party caucus appears to be writing what she called a "divisive" and "extreme" Republican Party agenda.

"I'm very concerned about how we're going to have a working majority when there aren't any moderates in the Republican Party and everyone belongs to the Tea Party," said McCollum.

Just three months ago, Bachmann accepted the endorsement of the Tea Party Express, whose president was dismissed this week after writing a racially-tinged parody letter to Abraham Lincoln.

On Wednesday, Bachmann said she's invited Democrats to join her caucus; which she said is for listening, not endorsing.

"We are here to listen and to be a receptacle," said Bachmann.

Despite Bachmann's hope that Democrats will join the Tea Party caucus, her invitation may have lost some of its punch.

Speakers were harshly critical of Obama. One compared him to the dictator Hugo Chavez and another said Obama is turning America into a socialist country.